2016 Old Town Farmers' Market Blogs
by Jane Hess Collins

August 16, 2016

Sun-kissed Peaches at Ashton Farms

Maybe it's just a coincidence that Ashton Farms places their crates of peaches in the warm sunlight. Or, maybe they know that it's almost impossible (at least for me) to not buy a few when they feel that good in my hand. And what kind of peach to buy? Ashton Farms sits on 25 acres around the areas of Martinsburg and Hedgesville, West Virginia, and grows nearly 15 varieties of yellow and white peaches, as well as apples, pears, berries, plums, cantaloupe and corn. Even better, they offer almost a dozen plates of free samples to Old Town Farmers Market customers on Saturday mornings.

Ada Ashton is the daughter of the founder and runs their market stand here and in Dale City. On a typical Saturday she greets shoppers with her big, friendly smile and invites them to try bites of peaches, tomatoes and nectarines. Ada believes that it is not only the peaches that makes Ashton Farms popular. "We are local and family-run," she explained. "Quite a few of my customers have been coming for 20-plus years. Some customers have been coming to our stand since my father started the farm in 1978."

"It's kind of a family thing," Ada continued. "Our customers have watched us grow up. I think that's one reason they like it." It is also one of the reasons Ada likes coming to the Old Town Farmers Market too. "I know these people," she said. "I also like seeing fresh faces and it's nice meeting the different types of people that come to our stand. I like talking with people and finding out what they like."

Ada believes another reason for their popularity is that customers tell her that they can taste the difference between local, hand-picked produce and that found in grocery store displays. That, she explained, is because big box produce is sometimes picked before it is actually ripe.

Those sun-warmed peaches I bought on a Saturday? They were picked on Thursday.

Ashton Farms also sells at farmers markets in Georgetown and Baltimore, and year-round at the Eastern Market.

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August 6, 2016

Ten Reasons to LOVE the Alexandria Old Town Farmers Market

August 7 to 13 is National Farmers Market week—all 8,500 of them! To celebrate this wonderful group, here are ten reasons that we LOVE our local farmers and other OTFM vendors:

The sensory explosion - The colors! The sounds! The flowers! The energy! Brace yourself before you arrive. Every Saturday trip to our market promises a joyful adventure. Walk around our square slowly and take it all in. What a great way to begin a weekend.

The History – Did you know our market is 260 years old and the oldest farmers' market in the country held continuously at the same site? We hear that George Washington sent his produce from Mount Vernon to be sold here. At the OTFM you can literally walk the same steps as your forebears.

The Produce – Our 70-plus vendors sell everything from carrots to watercolors, depending on the time of the year, but let's face it - it's all about the fruits and vegetables. Our farmers pick their produce at their peak ripeness and you can taste the difference between fresh-picked and ripened en route. Many of our farmers use practices consistent with organic standards and use chemical or pesticide-free labeled products. And, since our farmers all live within 200 miles of here we help Mother Earth by saving fossil fuels.

Your Neighbors – It's almost impossible to visit the OTFM and not run into someone you know. Many Alexandrians build an early morning market stop into their weekend routine. "We always love to stop by the market and see our friends and what is going on," said Holly Herman, who lives just a few blocks from the market with her husband John Butler. "We go every Saturday that we are in town. We also enjoy seeing all the seasonal produce, whether it's berries and fruit or squash."

Our SNAP/EBT Program – We accept SNAP/EBT (food stamps) and offer our SNAP/EBT customers up to $20 in matching incentive funds so all of our customers may enjoy the fresh goodness of our produce. Nationwide, the number of farmers markets and farmers accepting SNAP benefits has increased 40% on average annually since 2009.

Our Bike for Good Program – Local volunteers bicycle leftover fresh, locally grown food from the OTFM to nearby organizations that serve Alexandria's low-income and at-risk citizens the last Saturday of each month between May and October. Want to be part of the fun? Email BikeforGood@alexandriava.gov.

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The Vendors – Some of our vendors have been part of our OTFM family for 30 years. Not only do they know us, they look forward to seeing us, just as many shoppers look forward to seeing them. They have watched our kids grow up and are part of our Alexandria family.

The Jobs – Nationally, farmers markets and other locally owned retailers return more than three times as much of their revenue to the local economy than their chain and big-box competitors. Our vendors employ locally and keep our local economy going and growing.

The Performances – Every once in awhile, OTFM shoppers get the added bonus of a show on the small stage on the north side of the fountain. Whether it's bagpipers, African drummers, or a yoga class, the stage is ready for the next entertainer.

Christmas – Nothing can put you in the holiday spirit like our farmers market in December. The wreaths that our vendors create are works of art and the vendors sell unique and personal gifts. And, of course, that beautiful holiday tree and local choirs singing carols make our market place a site like no other.

Bonus Reason – Our market is one of 2,469 markets open year-round, keeping our farmers and vendors employed and giving us a reason to visit the Old Town Farmers Market every Saturday of the year.

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July 12, 2016

Exotic Produce, Exotic History at Charlotte Hall

What does the Old Town Farmers Market (OTFM) have in common with anthropologist Jane Goodall?

Give up? Farmer and wildlife biologist Lori Brown. With her husband Tony, of the Farmstead of Charlotte Hall, in Charlotte Hall, Maryland, Lori now grows and sells vegetables at the market but she also has conducted research on chimpanzees in Africa.

Lori's path to Charlotte Hall started in 1969 with her work at Gombe Stream Research Centre in Tanzania alongside famed British primatologist and anthropologist Jane Goodall. She later worked in West Africa and Sierra Leone on a park development project. Upon returning to Washington, DC, in the 1980s she worked for the World Wildlife Fund and the Worldwatch Institute.

Lori met and married Tony while working in Washington, DC, and in 1985 they moved to a caretaker's house on an estate in southern Maryland. They started a garden and discovered how much they enjoyed growing vegetable and flowers, so much so that in 1988 they bought 17 acres where they built their own home and the Farmstead of Charlotte Hall was born.

Her close connection to nature while in Africa influenced her approach to farming. "I spent every single day out there in the forest following chimpanzees," she explained. "It was just being so close to nature…it was like a life-altering experience in terms of your connection to the land [and] to the wildlife." Tilling the land and growing vegetables continues her close connection to nature. She and Tony use only organic methods, natural fertilizers, and organic pest controls, and much of the field work is done by hand rather than with a tractor.

When you stop by the Charlotte Hall stand, located in the northeast corner of the OTFM, you will find a selection of vegetables that you may not have seen before. Lori and Tony curate their non-GMO seeds from Europe, Asia, and Latin America, "trying to offer a cross-cultural collection of vegetables that people don't normally see in their supermarket."

Heirloom tomatoes are the most popular, although they grow up to 30 tomato varieties during their April to December market season. Other popular vegetables include French melons, French radishes, Japanese shishito peppers, Italian green beans, arugula and mixes of salad lettuces. Asian vegetables include mizuna, red mustards, pac choi, tatsoi, Asian eggplant, hakurei turnips and stir fry mixes of Asian greens. They also cater to OTFM customers who grew up in the South by offering okra, greens, southern crowder peas, and lima beans.

Charlotte Hall's exotic vegetables are a hit with OTFM customers. "We like to introduce people to new ways of using vegetables in their cooking," Lori said. "We hand out recipes to our customers who are willing to cook vegetables they never have eaten before."

Customers may also sign up for Charlotte Hall's Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, where they can pick up a bag of 6-8 seasonal vegetables each week.

The best part of farming and selling at the OTFM for over 20 years, Lori said, is "interacting with our customers, meeting new people, talking to them about food, their travels and watching their kids grow up."

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June 29, 2016

Shop Local – Shop Alexandria

One of the advantages of shopping at the Old Town Farmer's Market (OTFM) is the access to fresh, hand-picked locally-grown produce. None of the vendors at the OTFM are as local as those who are based in Alexandria. Here is a rundown of the local-est of the local:

Maribeth's Bakery is the grand dame of local vendors, having been part of the OTFM family for almost 30 years. Owner Maribeth Nyerges started her baking passion as a child, pouring through cookbooks, deciphering recipes and baking whatever she could. She started out as a single proprietor, and today employs 30 – 40 staff, most of whom work full time and live in or near Alexandria.

"Coming to the farmer's market every Saturday is definitely the highlight of my week," Maribeth wrote in an email. "It really measures and grounds my whole life. There is nothing that means more to me than to see kids' happy faces when they check out the box of decorated cookies on our table at the market. I have met most of my best and longest term friends through the Alexandria Farmer's Market. It has given me the opportunity to pull myself up by the bootstraps in life, and eventually provide jobs for a whole lot of other Alexandrians."

Number One Sons, in business only four years, sells kimchi, kraut and pickles – not your typical farmer's market fare. Caitlin Roberts, who co-owns Number One Sons with her brother Yi Wah (the "number one son" in their half-Chinese family) believes that fermented foods are part of the movement to eat well, and their healthy, quality and novelty products are part of that. Today their staff of three and farmer's market vendors sell at 24 markets, 10 local and online stores (including several Mom's Organic Markets) and several restaurants in the Washington, D.C. area. Committed to supporting local farmers, they source from fellow OTFM vendors Bigg Riggs and Spring Valley Farms.

WhimPop calls themselves an ice cream shop, and yet they are so much more. Scrambled eggs on a stick, anyone? For the OTFM they offer their frozen fruit pops, including spicy and cocktail-flavors, all made with fresh fruit and free of artificial ingredients, dairy, gluten and added sugar. Owner Maria Romano learned to make the pops from a friend in her native Mexico City, and today she employs six part-time staff to create and sell her unique treats. Now in their fourth year of business, WhimPop caters private events and weddings, and their King Street store celebrates its one-year anniversary this month.

Truly-Life owner Mellenie Runion made her first eco-friendly skin care soap as a party favor for her dog Max's birthday. Her soap was a huge hit, and Mellenie began learning how to make lip balms, loofahs, smudge sticks and lotions. After meeting the granddaughter of the original owner of her

home and learning that it had once been a small farm, Mellenie decided to honor that heritage by growing loofahs, herbs, and flowers, which she uses to form the base of her products. "I feel like I'm bettering the soil and bettering the environment," she said. All products are biodegradable and recyclable. Truly-Life is carried in seven Alexandria stores (Mellenie and her partner Andy sometimes deliver the products by bicycle) as well as other area farmer's markets and Whole Foods stores.

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June 15, 2016

Bigg Riggs Farm – Keeping it in the Family

Calvin Riggleman, a fifth generation farmer and former Marine from Romney, West Virginia, never expected to learn about farmers markets and canning from his fellow servicemen while they were deployed to Iraq in 2003. Most of Riggleman's farm experience came from working on Smith Farm in Hampshire County, his grandfather's farm that still sells his produce on a roadside stand along U.S. Route 50 between Romney, West Virginia, and Winchester, Virginia.

After returning home in 2004 from his deployment, Riggleman took his Marine comrades' advice and learned the canning business from his grandparents and a nearby commercial kitchen. His grandfather lent him part of his farm acreage and soon Bigg Riggs Farm was growing tomatoes, peppers, onions, berries and other produce. By year's end, Bigg Riggs salsas, jams, dressings, rubs, sauces, butters and relish were sold alongside his produce at his family's roadside stand.

That was the beginning for Riggleman. The next year he began selling at his first farmers market. In 2011 he and a business partner bought the commercial kitchen that had canned their dressing and sauces. Three years ago, he and his partner expanded Bigg Riggs Farm by purchasing 139 acres of land six miles from Smith Farms.

Today Bigg Riggs Farm operates year-round and sells in seven local farmers markets, online and of course his grandfather's roadside stand. Riggleman is proud of how his business has grown and of his contribution to the local economy. During the summer he employs 18 people at his farm and kitchen, including seven year-round, full time staff.

"Seven families depend on us selling stuff," he said, and that helps motivate him to keep growing.

His next project? Riggleman is about to debut Bigg Riggs moonshine and vodka. Check their website for details.

I came home with his onion salad dressing, French garlic dressing and his best-selling "Awesome Sauce" which is tastes like cayenne pepper-infused ranch dressing. Definitely try that with buffalo wings!

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May 28, 2016
Spring Valley Farm and Orchard – Picture Perfect Produce

If you want Spring Valley Farm and Orchard's strawberries, get to their Old Town Farmer's Market stand early. Last week at 9:00 a.m. their display table was laden with dozens of cartons of plump, red, tempting strawberries. When I returned to the market at 11:00 a.m. to buy them, the strawberries were all gone. Even the table was gone. Alexandria shoppers know a good thing when they see it, or taste it in this case.

Dakota Janowitz knows it too. At 20 years old he is one of two farm managers of Spring Valley Farm and Orchard, a 455-acre farm and orchard in Romney, West Virginia. Owned by Eli and Misty Cook since 1993, Spring Valley is open year-round and employs between 15 and 80 staff, depending on the time of year. They tend 130 acres of vegetables, 170 acres of fruit orchards (the remaining155 acres are woods), 12 greenhouses and resale operations at eight area farmer's markets, Grandy Farm Market in North Carolina, several produce companies and a roadside stand.

As farm managers, Janowitz and Joe Heishman oversee all soil preparation, a year-round job of plowing, tilling and planting. Janowitz is also the farm market leader, driving crops and crew to the market sites, setting up and tearing down the displays and ensuring the produce is ready for display.

Hard work, time, experimentation and skill are the keys to Spring Valley's success, Janowitz says. And, of course, good weather.

"All year long [weather is] a challenge," Janowitz told me. Weather affects everything from soil conditions to saving a crop to the number of farmer's market customers. Although skill can sometimes combat Mother Nature, he added, many times "it's all one big gamble."

Spring Valley's stand, located at the northeast corner of the Old Town Farmer's Market, is bursting with any combination of salad greens, spinach, Swiss chard, kale, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, squash, zucchini, pluots, pears and many varieties of peaches and apples. Right now they are promoting their strawberries, all perfectly placed in their green cardboard cartons.

Actually, all of Spring Valley's produce is perfectly placed, week after week, and that is not an accident. Every carrot, every pear is handled gently.

"From the time we put it in the ground to the time it goes in the customer's hands, we care for it as gently and as best as we possibly can," Janowitz says of his vegetables and fruit. Apples are carefully placed into baskets after picking. Salad greens are packed, but not smashed, into their cartons. Potatoes are handpicked. "And," added Janowitz, "we wash everything. We take pride in what we do."

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May 2016
Lopez Farms – A Family Affair

Carla Lopez may be the youngest vendor at the Old Town Farmers' Market. At the ripe age of nine, she spends her Saturday mornings helping out at the family Lopez Farms stand located at the southeast corner of Market Square. Carla has been part of the family's Saturday morning presence at the market "since I was little," she said, when her father sat her under the produce tables. Now she assists the customers, handles money and occasionally translates for her father, Lionel, who is always just a few steps away.

Lopez wanted to own a farming business after working on another farm in Clinton, Maryland, for 10 years. Ultimately he bought 20 acres in Northern Neck, Virginia, in 1999 and Lopez Farms was born. Lopez and his wife run the operation, assisted by three seasonal workers. His daughters sometimes help after school and occasionally his two-year-old son, Lionel, Jr., pulls a bean plant or two.

Lopez prides himself on the freshness of his produce. "We like to bring fresh food to the customer," Lopez says. His favorite part of his business starts with planting seeds, both outside and in his hothouse. "We see everything we are growing."

It is not an easy profession. "Farming is hard, I can tell you that," Lionel says. "We don't pick anything by machine. Only by hand. You are bending all day picking squash, tomatoes, beans. Sometimes we start at 5:00 a.m. and work until 6 or 7 o'clock." Customers want hand-picked vegetables, he told me, adding, "If it is picked by machine they don't come to you."

He beams proudly as Carla and her younger sister, Elizabeth, 8, sell broccoli, potatoes, tomatoes, beets and other produce to their loyal Saturday customers.

Lopez Farms sells their produce, and occasionally produce from nearby small farms, to the Old Town Farmers Market from March until November. I left the interview with a bag bulging with fresh, hand-picked kale, zucchini, carrots and asparagus. Dinner was never so good.

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April 2016

Kiwi Kuisine, Alexandria, Virginia

"Food and rugby are my passion," said Bertie Todd, owner and founder of Kiwi Kuisine. Actually Todd prefers to go by the name "Ram" although he admits that these days, "I'm more of a lamb than I am a ram."

A New Zealander Maori, Ram started playing rugby when he was six years old and eventually landed with the Washington Irish RFC. The United States was great, he said, but he was sick of eating hot dogs and desperately missed his native meat pies.

Ram decided to move back to New Zealand to learn the meat pie business. He knew the basics of cooking from his mother, a chef, and he asked a friend who owned a bakery to teach him the pastry business. Ram returned to the United States and started creating his meat and vegetable-filled pies, keeping them in the Maryland Exiles RFC fraternity house freezer to eat after practice When the other players kept eating them, Ram knew he had a business.

Kiwi Kuisine debuted in 2003, featuring meat pies filled with chicken, steak or lamb with vegetables, as well as sausage rolls, spinach rolls and other hearty meals. Four years later he began selling at Old Town Farmers' Market and other area markets. Today he sells at ten markets, Whole Foods, Balducci's and nearly 50 other grocery stores. He guarantees everything he sells, including the cold vegetable/fruit juices he makes using produce from other farmers' market vendors.

Ram's talents don't end with pie. Somewhat of a Maori Renaissance man, he is a Frank Sinatra impersonator and is the founder/president of Alexandria Rugby, a sports program for kids and adults that he started in 2006.

Ram's pies are better than the New Zealand original, he told me. The meat he uses is free of trans fat, steroids and antibiotics, and the pies are bursting with meat, unlike gravy-filled commercial pot pies. I tried the Curry Chicken pie and my husband had the Steak Guiness and they were amazing. No wonder Kiwi Kuisine sells out of its pies every Saturday.

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March 2016

Neopol Savory Smokery – Smoked Goodness at the Market

The beauty of a farmers' market is that the produce is local. It's not unusual to buy fruits and vegetables that were still in the ground or on a tree 24 hours ago. Sometimes, though, a vendor carries a product that cannot be sourced locally, and it's so incredibly good that we welcome them with open arms and shopping baskets.

Neopol Savory Smokery is that vendor. Each Saturday morning they sell out of their expertly smoked salmon, smoked salmon salad, whitefish, mussels, hummus (yes, they smoke their chickpeas) tofu and chicken, sustainably sourced from all over the world. Salmon, Neopol's signature product, comes directly from a coastal inlet in Scotland's North Highland from a salmon farm that is nearly three miles long and part of the salmon's natural migratory track.

Barbara Lahnstein, a German immigrant who founded Neopol 20 years ago, chose this salmon farm because of its sustainable practices, and uses the same standards to select the greenback mussels from New Zealand, rainbow trout from North Carolina, shrimp from the Gulf of Mexico and local chicken and eggs from farms in northern Baltimore County.

"She travels far and wide to find really sustainable producers," Andy Karnes told me. A part-time art professor at the Maryland Institute College of Art, Karnes began working at their Old Town Farmer's Market stand about a year ago, as a favor to his friend and Barbara's son Dorian.

Procuring world-class ingredients is half of the equation to their success. The other half lies in their smoking technique. The fish, chicken and other foods are hot smoked, meaning that they are cooked while they are placed on a smoking rack in a smoker for 8-10 hours with cherry, apple and peach wood. As they cook they absorb the smoked flavor of the fruitwoods.

With its origins at the Belvedere Square Market in Baltimore, Neopol arrived at the Old Town Farmer's Market about 18 months ago and already has a following of regulars who stop and shop with them faithfully each Saturday. The smoked salmon salad and salmon filets are the top sellers (and delicious. Yes, I took home a few samples).